

Syria welcomes expatriates home

By Lina Sinjab

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Syria is changing its legislation in order to attract its large number of expatriates back to the country, bringing their skills and capital with them.

President Bashar Assad himself lived in the UK for many years before coming to power in 2000 after the death of his father.

Measures include economic incentives and exemptions from military service. The latter was one of the main reasons expatriates would not even come back to the country to visit their families.

Baha Issa, in his 30s, lived for more than 15 years in the UK and Dubai. He has now left his job as a communications officer for Microsoft to work at the newly established Sham Holding company in Syria.

"I am very excited to come back. In a developed country you have slowly to climb the career ladder, but here you are part of a team that is taking the country to a different level," he says.

It is a message the government - which estimates that 15 million Syrians are living abroad, compared with 20 million at home - is keen to promote.

High qualifications

Dr Buthaina Shabaan is in charge of a special ministry set up to encourage them to return, bringing their business know-how with them.

"The ministry is established to facilitate relationships between expatriates and Syria. Many of these expatriates are highly qualified. It would be very beneficial to get them back, not necessarily to leave their countries, but at least to build bridges."

Dr Shabaan admits Syria is not always an easy place to work. As a country in transition, its institutions still have a long way to go to achieve efficiency.

"Don't think that we can make Syria a better place [immediately]. You are coming back to participate in making Syria a better place, including fighting bureaucracy, corruption and every negative aspect that we all suffer from."

Some believe that the culture of the homeland, along with new business opportunities, compensates for difficulties.

In the 1990s, Samer Kallas - an architect in his 50s who lived the US - was reluctant to live in a country that was lagging behind the West technologically and in terms of development.

But after 11 September, 2001, his view changed.

"There is no perfect place on earth. Syria has a lot of obstacles, but we should not expect everything to be available and ready and given.

"After 11 September, the whole atmosphere in the US became distorted, especially towards Arab origins or background, so I felt more freedom to come back to the Middle East".

Absent freedoms

But for many returning Syrians, the greater economic freedom does not fully make up for the lack of political freedom. Yousef Abdalki, a well-known artist who went to France in the 1980s after being jailed for membership of the Socialist Labour Party, has now returned to settle in his old home town.

"I came back because it is my right to come back. I don't think much has changed in the nature of authorities or their security control, but the global situation has changed.

"We still have people imprisoned for expressing their views. I don't think a country can develop while freedoms are absent." Nevertheless, he says he has great hope that Syrians will one day enjoy freedom of expression.

In the old city of Damascus, young musicians prepare for a concert at a small theatre.

Theatro is a popular venue that was opened by actress Mai Skaf.

She is keen to offer young Syrian artists a place for free expression.

"Theatro started with an idea which was a dream that we as young artists have energy, enthusiasm, and a desire to work in a field that we know and that is an entity for us.

"Cultural movements raise the infrastructure of the society and create chances for young artists to stay and achieve their dreams here.

Personally I feel I am not able to see my project or myself outside Syria - to live and work outside Syria, I feel I would lose my identity."

Significantly, perhaps, most of the musicians here are planning their future in Syria.

While exact figures on the number of Syrian returnees are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests many people are being attracted back.

The real test of the government's success, though, will be whether members of the younger generation decide this is where they want to live too.